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—Jim Wilson, chief counsel to the House Government Reform Committee (Page 3)

DRAWING STRAWS

House Pushes Tougher Campaign Law

The conviction last week of a fund-raiser for Vice President Al Gore is one of the biggest victories yet for the oft-criticized Justice Department campaign finance task force.

Maria Hsia, a Los Angeles immigration consultant, was found guilty in D.C. federal court of illegally funneling \$109,000 to the Democratic Party during the 1996 presidential election.

And while Hsia awaits sentencing, legislation is moving through Congress that aims to make it easier to get convictions in future campaign finance cases.

Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.)—chairman of the House Government Reform Committee and a critic of DOJ's campaign finance probe—is pushing a bill that would give Justice sharper tools to go after those who use third parties, or “conduits,” to funnel money to political campaigns or parties.

The bill would raise the punishment for knowingly making contributions on behalf of illegal donors from a misdemeanor to a felony. The measure, which has 61 co-sponsors (only three of whom are Democrats),

would also increase the civil penalties for such violations, close loopholes surrounding foreign campaign contributions, and would require the Federal Election Commission to refer cases to the Justice Department when it finds probable cause that a willful conduit contribution has been made.



GORED: Maria Hsia faces 25 years behind bars for questionable fund-raising at a Buddhist temple event attended by the vice president.

Hsia was convicted of five counts of causing false statements to be made to the FEC—a convoluted, hard-to-prove charge used by the feds in part because it's a felony.

“You may as well cut to the chase and say that these crimes are bad from the get-go,” says Jim Wilson, Burton's chief committee counsel.

One DOJ official agrees that the bill could deter would-be campaign finance violators, saying, “There's no question that most people who are mindful of the law will think twice if something they're doing will result in a felony.”

But a House Democratic leadership aide says he's suspicious of the Burton bill, given the fiercely partisan nature of its lead sponsor and the dearth of Dem supporters. “Single rifle shots like this are not particularly useful,” says the aide.

—SAM SKOLNIK